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ABSTRACT

For more than a year the 2.3 million member National Education Association (NEA) and the 900,000 member American Federation of Teachers (AFT) engaged in merger negotiations. The plan was to bring American teachers together in one union for collective bargaining, political action, and education policy. This report gives a detailed picture of the maneuvers by the union leaders and their opponents, and the final vote that rejected the proposal. The report includes: a history of the NEA and AFT--professionalism versus unionism; the negotiations--the meeting of the joint council; principles of unity--AFL-CIO affiliation, states' rights; the debate; the vote; and the future of the NEA. (SLD)

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by Mike Antonucci

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Left at the Altar

The Teachers' Union Merger and the Prospects for Education Reform

by
Mike Antonucci

THOMAS B. FORDHAM FOUNDATION
OUTSIDE THE BOX

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Foreword

Education reformers often name teachers' unions as the greatest obstacle to significant change. Indeed, the unions have come under heavy fire in recent years as obdurate, self-interested defenders of an unsatisfactory status quo. In reaction both to this criticism and to increasing reform momentum, they set about to strengthen themselves. A major step in that direction was the attempted merger of the two principal unions, the 2.3 million member National Education Association (NEA) and the 900,00 member American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

While their romance was no secret, the education world was surprised by the announcement that a formal engagement might be entered into in July 1998, when delegates to both unions' conventions were asked to vote on the principles of merger. As soon as these votes were scheduled, observers began speculating about the effects that a single, giant teachers' union would have on education reform, as if approval of the merger were a done deal.

One observer who didn't take that approval for granted was Mike Antonucci of the Education Intelligence Agency, who has been closely studying the NEA and AFT for years and whose perspicacity and tenacity in this complex assignment are remarkable. We asked Mike to report on the merger vote and bring his considerable investigative and analytic skills to the story. As delegates to the NEA's national convention arrived in New Orleans to vote on the merger plan, Mike was there to watch and listen and ask questions. And when those delegates resoundingly rejected the proposed merger, Mike was uniquely situated to explain why.

In this report, Mike Antonucci gives us a fly-on-the-wall account of the maneuvers by the union leaderships and their opponents—from the earliest negotiations, through state conventions, floor debate in New Orleans, proposal and counter-proposal, to the final vote. He describes with care how the NEA leadership misread the concerns of its members and then attempted to force its position on convention delegates. And he discusses what the failed merger portends—both for unions and for American education.

Mike Antonucci is director of the Sacramento-based Education Intelligence Agency, which conducts education research, analysis and investigations. EIA's reports have led to articles in

Education Week, the *Detroit News*, the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* and other newspapers. Antonucci has published articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Investor's Business Daily*, *American Enterprise*, *Miami Herald*, *Sacramento Bee*, *National Review West*, *Los Angeles Daily News*, *Tampa Tribune*, *California Political Review*, *Contra Costa Times*, *Report Card*, and elsewhere. Before moving into the field of education reporting, Mike specialized in military history and intelligence. Readers wishing to contact Mr. Antonucci directly may write to him at the Education Intelligence Agency, P.O. Box 2047, Carmichael, CA 95609 or send e-mail to EducIntel@aol.com.

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Chester E. Finn, Jr., President
Thomas B. Fordham Foundation
Washington, D.C.
October 1998

Executive Summary

For more than a year, the 2.3 million member National Education Association and the 900,000 member American Federation of Teachers engaged in vigorous merger negotiations. The plan was to bring the vast majority of U.S. teachers under one banner for collective bargaining, political action and education policy. All that was required was to present the plan to the representative bodies of both unions, who would sanction the merger and start the ball rolling.

Would the two big unions, which each possessed virtual vetoes over education policy in Congress and most state legislatures, become a single national union monopoly, with all the evils and arrogance that monopolies imply?

Hardly anyone noticed the debate that was going on within the NEA. In a matter of four months, the proposed merger went from a certainty to a disaster. Not only did it fail to achieve the necessary two-thirds majority; it failed to come close to a simple majority. What happened? And what happens now?

The NEA's campaign to win votes for the Principles of Unity centered on the strength and influence that one huge union would have. The NEA saw the merger as providing a ready supply of needed reinforcements. NEA President Bob Chase and his staff appealed to the solidarity of teachers and of laborers. They depicted the proposed merger as a bold step that would reap great rewards.

In its attempt to win support for the merger, the NEA leadership used the same strong-arm methods that had won it victory in countless elections. Against its own state affiliate leaders, this heavy-handed approach began to backfire. Instead of winning support for the Principles of Unity, it began to stiffen the opposition.

"This is David versus Goliath," Philip Rumore, president of the Buffalo Teachers Federation, told *Education Week*. "The whole leadership of the NEA and their finest PR people are lining up to shove this thing down our throats."

The leaders of the NEA and the AFT found themselves facing an unprecedented rejection of a leadership-backed initiative; a proposal for follow-on negotiations that was opposed by 47 percent of NEA delegates; an upset and emboldened opposition faction within the NEA with opportunity for further cooperation among themselves; and AFT local leaders anxious to highlight their differences with the NEA. Post-merger commentaries have emphasized both unions' commitment to continue negotiations. The NEA persuaded commentators that the merger vote was only a temporary setback. In fact, the campaign and vote on the Principles of Unity not only made merger of the NEA and AFT improbable in the near future, but they may also signal a sea change in the NEA.

For the first time, the immediate future of the NEA is not entirely in the hands of its national leaders and staff. For good or ill, it is in the hands of the leaders of the anti-merger state affiliates. No merger can proceed without their support. The merger debate also demonstrated that NEA can no longer work its will on a pliant membership. Its grip on public education is similarly endangered.

Introduction

On July 5, 1998, Sally Grafentin, Chair of the National Education Association's Elections Committee, stood nervously in front of 15,000 delegates, guests and reporters. She read the results of that morning's voting. As she gave the vote totals of the various constitutional and bylaws amendments, there was not a single sound from the huge crowd. Everyone sat silent and motionless, awaiting the results of the one vote that could make all the others academic.

Ms. Grafentin then said: "The ballot proposition to accept the Unity principles, which require a two-thirds vote to pass, has failed."

The crowd exploded in cheers and applause for a full 25 seconds before they were called back to order by union President Bob Chase. Ms. Grafentin continued: "The Yes vote was 4,091 with 42.11 percent. The No vote: 5,624 — 57.89 percent."

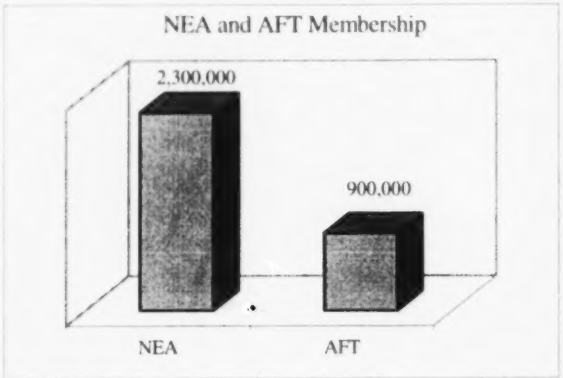
The assembly erupted yet again. The margin of defeat for the Principles of Unity, the document that outlined a proposed merger to create the nation's largest labor union, had caught everyone by surprise.

For more than a year, the 2.3 million member National Education Association (NEA) and the 900,000 member American Federation of Teachers (AFT) had engaged in rigorous negotiations over merger. The New Organization, as it was blandly called in negotiation documents, would bring the vast majority of public school teachers and education employees under one banner for collective bargaining, political action and education policy.

By January 1998, the framework for agreement had been set and in March the unions released the Principles of Unity. This document described the shape the new union would take, who would run it, and how its organizational structure would be built and administered. The Principles received the unanimous approval of the NEA Unity Negotiating Team, which consisted of the national union's top executives and key officials of some of NEA's largest state affiliates.

All that was required was to present the document to the representative bodies of both unions, which would then sanction the merger and start the ball rolling. The AFT's decision-making structure practically guaranteed support for the Principles. NEA might have to deal with some troublemakers, but it had an unblemished record in winning support for the initiatives of its leaders — particularly those of such importance. A few compromises here, a few promises there, and the deed would be done. So certain were the unions of ultimate passage, and so worried about the effects of a split vote, that they agreed any merger vote would require a two-thirds majority — even though the increased margin was not required by any NEA by-law or constitutional provision.

Though there had been news of accelerated merger talks throughout 1997, people associated with the public education establishment were caught off guard by the announcement of the upcoming votes. What would a single, giant teachers' union mean for the system? Even more concerned were those on the outside — people and organizations that were seeking education reform. Would the unions, which individually possessed virtual veto power over education policy drafted in Congress and most state legislatures, become a



national union monopoly, with all the evils and arrogance that monopolies imply? Would the mega-union become the immovable object against which reformers would beat themselves into exhaustion?

For months, analysts and observers wondered and debated about the merger's possible effect on public education. Perhaps the union would use its enhanced clout to support issues of teacher quality, high academic standards and solid curricula. Perhaps it would use its vast political machine simply to wring increased spending on salaries and benefits from legislatures and taxpayers.

Hardly anyone noticed the debate that was going on within the NEA.

In a matter of four months, the proposed merger went from certainty to disaster for NEA's leadership. Not only did they fail to achieve a two-thirds majority; they failed to come close to a simple majority. They lobbied, pressured and cajoled. They sent out "informational" packets on the merger. A letter went out above Mr. Chase's signature to each and every one of the 9,700 delegates, urging support for the Principles. State presidents known to be in favor of merger were hounded to deliver more votes for the Unity side. The night before the vote, pro-merger messages were left on the hotel phones of almost every first time delegate.

Yet they were defeated handily. How? And what happens now?

This report aims to answer those two questions, and others arising from the failure of the Principles of Unity. As someone who followed the events as they unfolded, and saw the writing on the wall back in April, I contend that the merger debate, vote and aftermath hold important lessons for people inside and outside the public education system.

History

NEA and AFT have very different roots. Though the political agendas of the two national unions have become less and less distinguishable over the years, their dissimilar origins continue to cause friction between them today.

NEA was founded in 1857 as a professional association of teachers, administrators and school superintendents. Even when teacher members became a majority, NEA Leadership tended to be dominated by administrators. The granting of a Congressional charter in 1906 (and with it, exemption from paying property taxes on its headquarters building in the District of Columbia) highlighted its detachment from traditional labor issues. The only other organizations Congress has ever chartered are the American Legion, AMVETS, American War Mothers, the American National Red Cross, the Boy Scouts of America, and the Disabled American Veterans. For the first 104 years of its existence, NEA officially opposed collective bargaining.

AFT was founded in 1916 and affiliated immediately with the American Federation of Labor. Its focus from the very beginning was on labor issues: wages, benefits, workplace conditions and bargaining. For many years, AFT had little success organizing large numbers of teachers, only increasing its modest membership at the same percentage as the growth of the teacher force.

Professionalism vs. Unionism

For years, administrators urged teachers to join NEA to keep them from practicing the collective bargaining advocated by the AFT. NEA focused on curriculum, education finance and teacher training. It wasn't until 1961 that the conflict between the "professionalism" of NEA and the "unionism" of the AFT came to a head. In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers, an AFT affiliate led by the late Al Shanker, engineered a collective bargaining vote among the city's teachers. Not only did the teachers overwhelmingly support collective bargaining; they also chose UFT as their sole representative.

The New York victory prompted AFT to seek representation elections in other states. Over the next three years, AFT membership nearly doubled. As city after city voted for exclusive AFT

representation, NEA began to reconsider its focus on administrators and professional issues. Over a period of 15 years, NEA gradually invested greater money in labor issues, adopted a constitution that guaranteed teachers a majority in the governance structure, and took on all the trappings of a labor union until, by 1978, the Internal Revenue Service and the U.S. Department of Labor fully recognized NEA as a union.

Though both unions sought to decertify affiliates of the other and win representation of those teachers for themselves (a process known as "raiding"), their major organizing efforts were concentrated on winning over teachers who had no representation. AFT, in attempting to organize the largest number of teachers in the shortest amount of time, had poured its initial resources into the large cities. It achieved a head start in urban areas that it still holds today.

But NEA took to organizing like a fish to water. Through superior tactics — most notably, its aggressive lobbying in state legislatures — and financial firepower, NEA soon dominated teacher representation in most non-urban areas, while winning enough large urban districts to keep AFT on the defensive. The unions continued to battle for members, but there were lulls in the fighting. Some affiliates of NEA and AFT merged, and talks of a national merger began in the 1970s. The reasons offered then were the same as those given today. Competition between the two unions was considered wasteful. As NEA and AFT grew in size and political clout, they also picked up critics and opponents. A merger was seen as an opportunity to pool resources and combine forces. But NEA's 1973 Representative Assembly established three non-negotiable conditions: no affiliation with AFL-CIO; guaranteed minority participation; and use of the secret ballot. At this point, the two organizations were still too different to comfortably merge, and talks quickly collapsed.

As NEA continued its transformation into a traditional labor union, differences between the two associations began to disappear. Some philosophical and political conflicts remained, but NEA's and AFT's agendas have long been closer than is widely reported. AFT's reputation for being more reform-minded is due in large part to the willingness of the late Albert Shanker (president of AFT from 1974 until his death in 1997) to criticize public education and personally advocate bold reforms. When push came to shove, however, AFT and NEA ordinarily supported the same candidates, the same legislation and the same status quo.

During the 1980s, while NEA and AFT were growing more alike, merger talks failed to gather steam due to the unwillingness of Shanker. Shanker was a huge fish in the smaller AFT pond. He had no ambitions to become the number two man in the larger NEA. And certainly NEA had no interest in handing itself over to Shanker. By 1993, NEA had moved slightly on the AFL-CIO affiliation issue, now only stipulating that no affiliate be "required" to join AFL-CIO.

> The political agendas of the two unions have become less and less distinguishable, but their dissimilar origins continue to cause friction.

Merger talk resurfaced in 1994. Preliminary discussions led the 1995 NEA Representative Assembly, the annual gathering of some 10,000 union delegates from across the country, to pass a new business item calling for continued negotiations with AFT for the ultimate purpose of merging the two organizations. It was under this authority that the Principles of Unity were negotiated.

It wasn't until Shanker's lengthy illness (followed by his death on February 22, 1997) and the accession of Sandra Feldman to the AFT presidency that the process accelerated. Feldman was not yet well-established in the national education world. And a merger, while consigning her to second place in the short term, would virtually assure her eventual leadership of a new organization almost four times the size of AFT.

With public education under greater criticism for its poor performance, and with teachers' unions increasingly cited as the main opposition to reform, it seemed the time had arrived to bolster the unions' cause. Merger took on a new impetus.

The first step was to institute a national "no raid" agreement. This amounted to a cease-fire between the two organizations while discussions were taking place. The agreement took effect on January 1, 1997 and ran through May 31, 1998. NEA's and AFT's top officials directed the negotiations from the start.

Negotiating teams met several times during the first half of 1997. While both sides were getting better acquainted, NEA and AFT approved 15 mergers of local affiliates: 11 in Minnesota, 2 in New Mexico, 1 in Kansas and 1 in Montana. However, proposed state level mergers in New Mexico, Montana and Minnesota were placed on hold, pending the outcome of national negotiations. NEA in particular did not want state mergers to change the dynamics of the negotiations while they were taking place.

Seeking to promote good fellowship, the negotiating teams developed the AFT/NEA Joint Council. Thirty members — 15 from each union — were appointed by their respective leaderships. But in their efforts to ensure cooperation, the unions chose participants who tended to be supportive of merger. Of the 15 council members appointed by NEA, only two represented states that would ultimately oppose merger. All represented large state affiliates. This shortage of opposition viewpoints was a mistake that was to be repeated several times by NEA.

The Joint Council meets

The first meeting of the Joint Council (in June 1997) concentrated on the selection of appropriate areas for joint activities. "We have attempted to take on the tough issues in ways that represent common sense, proven practice, and fresh thinking, and to involve all constituencies in the process," read a joint communiqué issued by Mr. Chase and Ms. Feldman. The areas selected were school discipline, school infrastructure, and teacher quality.

When Mr. Chase announced the Joint Council's agenda at a news conference in November 1997, he emphasized that it should "not be viewed in the context of a merger" but as a stand-alone effort to join forces with AFT for the good of public education. Others, however, saw the council's formation as preliminary hand-holding. "If the joint council is successful in its work, it will increase the likelihood that a merger would occur sooner," said Adam Urbanski, an articulate AFT vice president and president of the Rochester Teachers Association. "I think it's wise not to get married to a stranger. So think of this as an organizational form of dating."

The NEA/AFT Joint Council approved plans for a joint conference on teacher quality to be held in September 1998 and put together a panel of educators and business people to develop "innovative approaches in school financing." Other actions approved included: producing a video on classroom management; releasing a state-by-state report on school discipline legislation; and creating state joint councils in several states.

While the Joint Council began its work, union negotiating teams were also meeting and hashing out details. Five of the ten members on the NEA side were high-ranking national officers and staff: President Chase, Vice President Reg Weaver, Secretary-Treasurer Dennis Van Roekel, Executive Director Don Cameron, and Assistant Executive Director Evelyn Temple. The three state affiliate presidents on the team were from states known to support the concept of merger (New York, Washington and Florida). There were no outspoken anti-merger voices on the team.

From the outset of negotiations, there was virtually no talk of differences in political agendas, or strongly held philosophical beliefs, or much difference of opinion on education matters at all. "We shared the same classroom experiences, the same dreams, even the same sense of humor," said Mr. Chase. "In fact, listening to each other, we couldn't tell a member of the NEA from a member of the AFT!"

There were, however, long and drawn-out battles over the governance structure that the new organization would take. AFT consists of large urban locals with weak state affiliates. Many local

presidents serve as officers in the national union. AFT officers can stand for re-election every two years for life. Its convention uses weighted voting that is reported by affiliate. It represents large numbers of non-education employees. And, of course, AFT is affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

NEA, on the other hand, relies on strong state affiliates to provide services to locals. Officers can hold only one elected position, and there are term limits for every significant office. Convention voting is one person-one vote, by secret ballot. Only a handful of NEA state affiliates organize non-education employees. And, of course, NEA is not affiliated with AFL-CIO.

Early in the discussions, the decision was made that no one would lose his or her job due to the merger.

Early in the discussions, the decision was made that no one would lose his or her job due to the merger. So a place had to be found not only for every officer of both unions, but also for every member of the unions' sizable permanent staff. This decision led to compromises that ultimately helped sink the merger.

For months, progress was made over dividing the spoils — who would run what and for how long. The AFL-CIO question was more difficult to finesse. Continued affiliation with AFL-CIO was AFT's one non-negotiable demand. The new organization would be affiliated, and no AFT local would be permitted to disaffiliate. NEA entered the negotiations hoping to establish a special "non-affiliation" affiliation with AFL-CIO, whereby the new organization would retain NEA's independence, but would establish organizational ties of some sort with the union coalition. This nuanced position didn't last long, and NEA was forced to its fallback position: AFL-CIO affiliation only at the national level. State and local affiliates would be free to affiliate or not, as they wished.

AFT negotiators accepted this on condition that the ultimate goal would be full affiliation at all levels of the new organization, and insisted that the officers of the new union would actively support that goal. NEA agreed and the pieces of the unity agreement began to fall into place in December 1997.

"We anticipate a vote this summer"

On January 21, 1998, Mr. Chase and Ms Feldman sent a joint progress report to state officials and staff. "We are now closer to this new, united organization than ever before," it read. "Over the last several months, after a series of intense negotiating sessions, our AFT and NEA negotiating teams have reached conceptual agreement on a long list of important issues that need to be resolved before any new organization can be created."

Then, the big news. "We anticipate a vote this summer at the AFT Convention and the NEA Representative Assembly on the principles defining a framework for a united organization. Passage of these principles would constitute a formal commitment to create this new organization."

The report laid out the various provisions upon which NEA and AFT had agreed. These provisions were ultimately incorporated into the Principles of Unity. It also outlined those issues which would not be addressed by the principles (instead being left for the writing of the new organization's constitution and by-laws), but which would have a major impact on the subsequent debate and vote. These issues included the new dues rate. Chase and Feldman noted, "We haven't talked about a national dues rate and the share of dues that would go to each level."

In February, the finishing touches were placed on the document and on March 11, Mr. Chase presented the Principles of Unity to the NEA Board of Directors, state affiliate presidents and executive directors. The honeymoon lasted only a few weeks.

Principles of Unity

There were eight Principles of Unity — broad axioms with varying amounts of detail regarding how they would be advanced. A large number of these details drew immediate criticism and played a significant part in the subsequent debate and vote, but only two were compelling enough to trigger organized opposition. It should not have surprised NEA's top officers that one of these was a precondition that derailed the 1973 negotiations: affiliation with AFL-CIO. But the second detail turned out to be even more important: the new organization would reduce the power of the state affiliates in shaping the national union's policy.

Sticking Point #1 - AFL-CIO affiliation

The Principles of Unity stated: "The United Organization will be a national affiliate of the AFL-CIO" and that "The United Organization's goal will be full affiliation with the AFL-CIO at every level." The NEA negotiating team thought this splitting of hairs would satisfy the state affiliates that were wholeheartedly opposed to AFL-CIO affiliation. They would not be required to affiliate. Opponents refused to draw that distinction.

Their objections had two elements: the first philosophical and the second pragmatic. Mr. Chase had spent more than a year addressing union members across the country on his doctrine of "new unionism." In general terms, new unionism discards the union's confrontational approach to bargaining and public education issues in favor of a collaborative approach. It accepts responsibility for the quality of the product — educated students. Mr. Chase repeatedly referred to industrial-style unionism as a remnant of the past, no longer suited to today's environment. He encouraged the comparison of teaching to other white-collar professions, such as law and medicine. Many members saw affiliation with the AFL-CIO — the symbol of old-style industrial unionism — as contradicting this new emphasis.

Secondly, many state affiliate presidents, particularly those in right-to-work states (states that do not allow mandatory union membership or representation fees as a condition for employment), knew that affiliation with AFL-CIO would cause wholesale defections from the union. They feared that independent teacher groups would seize a recruiting opportunity. Bob Gilchrist, president of the Iowa State Education Association and one of the ringleaders of the opposition, put it simply: "If members think we are 'just a union' they will stop joining and join the PEI — Professional Educators of Iowa. They are just waiting to send out a mailing."

Sticking Point #2 - States' rights

The Principles of Unity centralized the operations and decision-making of the new organization well beyond anything previously found in NEA. In order to ensure that all the current leaders of NEA and AFT would support the plan, the new governance structure had to contain sufficient high-prestige positions for everyone. This led to a compromise that was much closer to the top-heavy AFT model, which has weak state affiliates. This in turn would reduce the relative influence of NEA's state affiliates and staff, even though there was a guarantee of no layoffs. This goes far to explain why state affiliate staffers were so lukewarm, if not hostile, to the merger plan.

NEA has three national officers who are elected by the delegates to the Representative Assembly. The Principles added four more vice presidents. These seven people would be full-time employees and oversee the day-to-day workings of the union. NEA has a nine-member Executive Committee (including the three national officers) that meets seven times a year. This would have been replaced by an Executive Board of 37 members (including the seven national officers) to meet seven times each year.

The key bone of contention was the NEA Board of Directors. This body consists of some 160 representatives (at least one from each state) that meets five times a year. Through its votes, the board exercises some control over decisions made by the Executive Committee and the national officers. Under the Principles of Unity, the Board would be disbanded in favor of a 400-member Leadership Council. Meeting only three times each year, the council would have included all state affiliate presidents, presidents of all local affiliates with more than 2,500 members, and others elected at-large from the states.

The real problem was the new council's lack of policy power. The Principles said that the Leadership Council "Will advise, assist, and make policy and program recommendations to the United Organization convention, officers, and Executive Board." Many state affiliate leaders, particularly those from smaller states, saw this as a move to silence them.

Less than four months remained until the vote. A large number of state affiliates had already held their state conventions and so would not be able to formally debate the Principles and hold non-binding votes on them before the Representative Assembly in New Orleans. Mr. Chase and his staff had a plan for those states that still had conventions upcoming. They would personally appear at the conventions, answer questions about the Principles, and quiet any fears. Such a strategy would pick up individual delegate votes even in difficult states. This, coupled with a natural advantage in framing and controlling the debate during the Representative Assembly, would be sufficient to gather 75 or 80 percent of the delegate vote.

First up were Illinois and Iowa. Both had expressed serious reservations about the plan. President Chase would address the delegates at both state conventions. Vice President Reg Weaver, a former president of the Illinois Education Association, would join Chase in Illinois and start the ball rolling.

The Debate

NEA's campaign to win votes for the Principles of Unity centered on the strength and influence that one huge union would have — not only in winning political battles in Congress and in state legislatures, but also in self-defense against the growing criticism of public education. Whether the analogy was the pooling of resources or the circling of wagons, NEA saw the merger with AFT as providing a ready supply of badly needed reinforcements. Chase and his staff appealed to the solidarity of teachers and of laborers. They depicted the proposed merger as a bold step that would reap great rewards.

In Iowa and Illinois they listened attentively. But when it came time for the delegates to question and debate, they didn't talk about bold, new visions of the future. They asked pointed questions about the document they were being asked to approve. They wanted details and more details. They asked about costs, changes in representation and control of policy. And too often, questions about the nuts-and-bolts were met with vague answers.

Illinois voted to oppose the Principles by a 2 to 1 margin. Iowa voted 3 to 1 against.

Though unhappy with the outcomes, NEA was confident it had a workable minority in two tough states. Once the big states started to come on board, the undecideds would see the inevitability of it all.

By the end of April the results from the state affiliate conventions were disappointing, but by no means grim. Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Montana and New Mexico all approved the Principles. The only other official anti-merger vote came from Virginia — which saw AFL-CIO affiliation as anathema in a right-to-work state.

Board of Directors vote

A new opportunity for pro-merger momentum arrived on May 2. The NEA Board of Directors met in Washington. The Principles of Unity were on the agenda and there would be a recorded vote. The Board, made up of representatives from the states, is a stepping stone to higher office in NEA. While representing their states, board members also look to their futures in the union hierarchy. NEA leaders lobbied them relentlessly before the debate.

Some five hours of speeches, arguments and intense emotion ensued. Then the vote. The Principles of Unity passed 106 to 53 — exactly a two-thirds majority. Later, some members of the Board complained that the vote was a matter of loyalty and not policy. If the Board of Directors, the state representative body with which NEA headquarters had the most clout, could only pass the motion by 2 to 1, how would the Representative Assembly delegates be swayed?

The margin was bad news, though one would never have known it from NEA's press release: "In a historic vote, the Board of Directors of the National Education Association (NEA) today voted overwhelmingly to recommend that the NEA Representative Assembly approve guidelines for uniting with the America Federation of Teachers (AFT) to form a new national organization."

Mr. Chase's statement was even more hyperbolic. "This was a vote about our children's — and our nation's — future," he said.

Unfortunately for Chase and his colleagues, even his muted victory was short-lived. While the Board was meeting, the state convention of the Michigan Education Association, NEA's fourth largest affiliate, was also in session. Michigan, of course, is one of the most pro-labor states in the country. But MEA President Julius Maddox knew the minds of his delegates, and he delivered a speech in opposition to the merger, citing AFL-CIO affiliation as his main objection.

"We don't believe enough discussion has been given to what the focus of this new organization would be or how, in fact, to resolve conflicts from competing interests when those interests are part of the same group," he told the crowd. The next day, the delegates voted more than 4 to 1 to oppose the Principles of Unity. Despite the ballyhooed Board vote, there were now more anti-merger delegates than pro-merger delegates.

Time to panic

NEA went into crisis mode almost immediately. State presidents known to be in favor of merger were told to bring in as many votes as possible. And, like the ward heelers of old, they did their best to deliver.

Pennsylvania State Education Association President David J. Gondak and Pennsylvania Federation of Teachers president Albert Fondy sent a joint letter to the members of their respective unions. "We believe that the unification of the NEA and the AFT at the national level and, subsequently, here in Pennsylvania is truly necessary for the survival of public education and of our school employee unions — perhaps even for the survival of the union movement altogether," the letter read.

> When it came time for the delegates to question and debate, they didn't talk about bold, new visions of the future. They wanted details and more details.

State affiliate staff, and some members of the national staff, had failed to jump on the merger bandwagon. Some felt the merger would ultimately lead to downsizing and layoffs (though NEA vehemently denied this). Others, having spent many years in the trenches fighting AFT, did not want to bury the hatchet. Whatever their reasons, they soon got their marching orders from NEA Executive Director Don Cameron, the man responsible for overseeing the staff.

On May 14, Cameron sent an e-mail message to the national and state staffs in which he addressed the question of where NEA and affiliate employees should stand on the merger issue. "NEA is NOT neutral on this issue," Cameron wrote. "Therefore, neither is NEA staff. NEA strongly supports, and is actively advocating for, the approval of the Principles of Unity by the delegates to the 1998 NEA Representative Assembly. So, therefore, is the staff."

Cameron made it abundantly clear that staffers were to put their personal feelings aside and follow the game plan. "Consequently," he wrote, "it is my expectation that NEA staff will, whenever possible, use available opportunities to advance NEA's unity position and policy."

The heavy-handed approach began to backfire. Instead of winning support for the Principles of Unity, it began to stiffen the opposition. The incessant pushing from the national headquarters caused something virtually unprecedented in the modern NEA. The opponents began to coalesce, then push back.

The first signs were on the Unity Message Board. NEA had set up an electronic bulletin board on its World Wide Web site for members to post comments on the Principles of Unity. Some 500 messages and responses were posted over a period of 10 weeks. The messages ran about 10 to 1 against merger.

Anti-merger affiliate officers began to preach opposition to their own members. Bob Gilchrist, president of the Iowa State Education Association, made merger opposition the main plank of his campaign for a seat on NEA's Executive Committee. Michael Johnson, president of NEA's second-largest affiliate, the New Jersey Education Association, sent messages to New Jersey delegates, listing reasons to oppose merger. The Michigan Education Association voted to spend $2,000 on an anti-merger campaign.

Even in pro-merger states there were pockets of strong anti-merger sentiment. NEA's New York affiliate voted to support merger, but its largest local affiliate, Buffalo, was outspoken in opposition. Philip Rumore, president of the Buffalo Teachers Federation, sent an open letter to his colleagues. "We are being told that the sinister forces out there are so great that we need to unite," he wrote. "How many times in history has this resulted in horrible consequences because the proposed solution was wrong?"

Anti-merger side organizes

The noise was getting loud from the state affiliates, but it might have come to nothing had the state presidents who were opposed to merger not agreed to coordinate strategy. Twice prior to the Representative Assembly, Gilchrist, Johnson and Rumore met with a handful of other state presidents. Calling themselves the Coalition for Democratic Principles (CDP), this opposition faction planned campaign strategy, floor debate and, most important of all, an alternative to the Principles of Unity.

Called "Unity Without Merger," the plan would build on the cooperative steps of the merger negotiation process. The no-raid agreement would be extended, the AFT-NEA Joint Council would be renewed, and the two teachers' unions would seek new areas to collaborate. The plan would be introduced as a new business item should the merger vote fail.

"This is David versus Goliath. The whole leadership of the NEA and their finest PR people are lining up to shove this thing down our throats."

The anti-merger side had the momentum, but they knew what they were up against. "This is David versus Goliath," Rumore told *Education Week*. "The whole leadership of the NEA and their finest PR people are lining up to shove this thing down our throats."

By June 15, the state conventions were completed. States representing 34 percent of the delegate vote were pro-merger. States representing 32 percent of the delegate vote were anti-merger. The remainder had taken no formal position.

The handwriting was already on the wall. The Coalition for Democratic Principles had almost all the votes it needed to sink the merger already, and these were solid. States like Pennsylvania and Ohio, crucial to any hope for Chase and his Unity Caucus (as the pro-merger forces called themselves), failed to get resolutions of support through their conventions. States that were in the pro-merger camp, like California, Wisconsin, Georgia and New York, still had sizable anti-merger minorities. It was going to take an electoral miracle for merger to pass.

But NEA had pulled off electoral miracles before, most recently in California, where it had helped wipe out a 40 point polling deficit to defeat Proposition 226, the "paycheck protection" initiative that would have restricted the practice of automatically deducting PAC contributions from the paychecks of union members. The Unity Caucus, backed by the influence of NEA headquarters, would pull out all the stops.

Mr. Chase authorized a special mailing to each delegate. The letter urged a Yes vote for the Principles of Unity as a defense against "extremists" who want to control public education.

"I feel a sense of urgency," Chase wrote. "Tenure rights, political participation rights, retirement systems, and health care programs are under assault from political and economic ideologues. Well-organized, well-financed special interests want to privatize education. We can't allow that to happen." On a "campaign trip" to Kentucky, Chase read from a list of "extremist" organizations generated by NEA staff (such as Americans for Tax Reform and the Alexis de Tocqueville Institute) to illustrate the nature of the threat to a group of Kentucky delegates.

NEA also worked the media. Chase told the Associated Press on June 8: "Although there are some who are against it, there's absolutely no reason why we can't get the two-thirds vote." He called a press conference in Washington on June 10 to explain the procedures for the vote. "We are confident that we will in fact get that two-thirds vote," he said. "We are working hard at it."

There was no such frenzy on the AFT side. The AFT Executive Council voted 29 to 0 to support the Principles of Unity. There were a few lonely voices in Oklahoma City and Fairfax County, Virginia speaking against it, but it appeared to be a foregone conclusion. Other AFT merger opponents were merely laying low, hoping NEA would vote the thing down so they wouldn't have to speak up. "AFT is big on reprisals," one prominent AFT leader told me.

Having spent months handicapping the vote, I was bewildered by NEA's sense of confidence. On June 8, I predicted flatly in an EIA Communiqué that merger would fail. "In fact," I wrote, "there is an outside chance it will not achieve a simple majority." During the weeks that followed, I studied, researched, and interviewed. Just prior to the convention I wrote, "Taking all the information at my disposal into account, EIA estimates current merger support among delegates at 53.5 percent. The next (admittedly unscientific) step is to estimate how much of the opposition is 'soft,' and liable to be turned by the very real pressure that will be brought to bear by the national leadership and by those within some of the state caucuses. EIA predicts an ultimate 60-40 vote in support of merger at the NEA Representative Assembly on July 5 — falling some 650 delegate votes short of the necessary two-thirds majority."

The Vote

Mark Simon, president of the Montgomery County Education Association in Maryland, was a strong supporter of Bob Chase and the Principles of Unity: "I think people will form their opinions at the convention," he said. He didn't know how right he was.

The Maryland delegation was split as it arrived in New Orleans for the Independence Day weekend, as were more than a dozen others. There was still time for the Unity side to turn things around. They had a committed cadre of activists to promote the Principles. But they were going up against opponents who were armed with all the same techniques and tactics. For every button, poster, pamphlet, and rally the Unity Caucus put together, the Coalition for Democratic Principles had one of its own.

At a morning press briefing just prior to the opening of the convention, Chase expressed optimism about the merger vote. "Momentum is

building in a positive way and I am confident," he said. He was merely posturing for the media. That morning Keith Geiger, one-time president of both the Michigan Education Association and the NEA, gave the Michigan delegates a rousing pro-merger speech. When he was done, the delegates held a straw poll. The results: One vote to support merger, almost 500 against.

Keynote speech

Addressing some 9,700 delegates, Chase's keynote speech touched all the usual buttons. "The NEA will not let extremists colonize public education for their own ideological ends," he said. "NEA will not let free market forces exploit inner city parents and children for profit. And NEA will not let our opponents silence unions and disparage educators."

When he got to the Principles of Unity, he tried the historical, "moment of destiny" approach.

"These Principles are the functional equivalent to our nation's Declaration of Independence. That is, these Principles state the goals and ideals of a new, unified organization and lay out the basics of how the new organization will operate," he told the delegates.

The comparison shocked many delegates — since the NEA is independent and the Principles were designed, in part, to incorporate them into the larger AFL-CIO empire. He also compared the Principles to the Louisiana Purchase, because the stewards of our nation "were facing the prospect of expanding their world by one third."

Chase utilized selective citation: "A professor named Bruce Cooper said, 'A big union can tackle big problems in big ways. It could annually select three major national projects to improve schools for children. Such as universal pre-schooling. A computer on every desktop. Literacy for every student by third grade'." Chase neglected to mention what else Professor Cooper had said about the proposed merger: "A single union could easily become an oligarchy, with centralized power, the re-election of the same leaders term after term, and the weakening of dissent within union ranks."

NEA, which has proved itself so adept in shaping the debate over public education, badly misinterpreted the concerns of its target audience — the member delegates. While the delegates wanted to know how the Leadership Council and the Executive Board would interact, Chase was asking them to merge "for the children."

"How will history judge us?" Chase concluded. "How will we judge ourselves if we don't seize this moment of destiny?"

Challengers speak up

Just before lunch (and after most of the press had left) came the speeches by candidates for NEA's Executive Committee. Running against two incumbents was Bob Gilchrist, president of the Iowa State Education Association. Gilchrist was an anti-merger leader, and the delegate response to his speech was a harbinger of things to come.

He opened with "I don't support the Principles of Unity and I don't think you should either." He was interrupted by wild applause.

"Never mind what it [AFL-CIO affiliation] means to the NEA officers or even your state officers. I want you to focus on the folks back in your [school] building," Gilchrist told the delegates.

NEA badly misinterpreted the concerns of the member delegates. While the delegates wanted to know how the Leadership Council and the Executive Board would interact, Chase was asking them to merge "for the children."

"A couple of my friends have said, 'Bob, you know this merger was going along pretty good until you folks in Iowa and some other states got involved. You're just the proverbial skunk at the picnic.' Well, I guess I'm a bit of a skunk, but this deal has a smell to it," he said to the cheering crowd.

"This election is not a career step for me," he concluded. "This association is not my career, it's a service project. My career is teaching."

Gilchrist's folksy populism captivated a large number of delegates who hadn't known who he was until that minute. The first jarring moment for merger supporters occurred when the results of the

Executive Committee election were announced. Ousting an incumbent from any elected NEA office is a virtual impossibility, and Gilchrist failed to pull off a miracle. But he received 4,253 votes — a full 45.1 percent.

The stunned looks on the faces of many NEA staffers (overlooked by the press) told the story. For unity to pass, over 1,100 Gilchrist voters would have to support it. The vote was helpful in one way, though. NEA now knew exactly how big a hill it had to climb. It had 24 hours to swing 1,100 votes.

Debate on the floor

The afternoon floor debate was crucial for the Unity Caucus. "This is a pivotal moment in the history of public education and of our organization," said Chase as he opened the debate.

Speakers for and against the Principles of Unity alternated at the microphones. From the outset, the emotional advantage was with the anti-merger side. Gerri Williams of Delaware was the first anti-merger speaker. She spoke of her fears that a small state like Delaware would lose its voice in the larger organization. She choked back tears as she told the assembly, "I urge you to vote against the Principles of Unity, and save my vote."

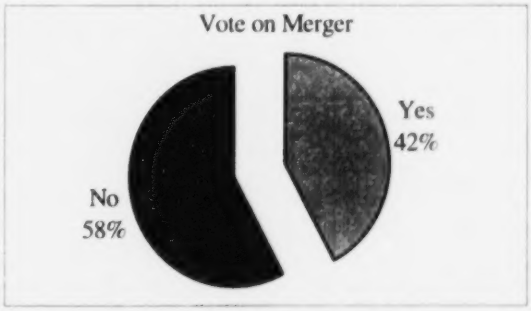
But if one speaker could be said to have brought the house down, it was Mary Washington, president of the Louisiana Association of Educators. Speaking on behalf of the Louisiana delegation, Ms. Washington said that "today we are given a set of principles that makes a mockery of our core beliefs." Focusing on the lack of policy-making power of the Leadership Council, the new organization's replacement for the NEA Board of Directors, Washington declared that reducing that body to an advisory one was "unacceptable, unacceptable, unacceptable!" The assembly roared as she finished.

The pro-merger side lined up all its heavy guns. The state affiliate presidents from California, Florida and New York all took turns at the microphone, pleading and cajoling in an attempt to reverse the tide. The Unity Caucus was not helped by Mike Billirakis, president of the Ohio Education Association and a merger supporter, who elicited groans and shouts from the crowd when he likened a vote against the Principles of Unity to a vote against the Declaration of Independence.

Throughout it all, Bob Chase appeared taken aback by the forcefulness of the opposition. The debate was heated, but decorous. The vote to close debate passed easily — after only two hours, and 34 speakers (17 from each side). This showed that neither side felt further debate was likely to sway anyone.

Finally, the vote

The polls were open for 3 ½ hours on July 5. As delegates headed out to vote, the *New York Times* headline read: "Teachers See Close Ballot on Big Merger." The story, by Steven Greenhouse, noted, "Even the leaders of the 2.3 million-member education association, who are campaigning feverishly for the merger, acknowledge that the vote, on Sunday, might be a cliffhanger and that they might not get the two-thirds required for approval."



At 12:30, the stunning results were announced. The cliff on which NEA had been hanging collapsed. In fact, it was a landslide. Over 5,600 delegates had voted against the Principles of Unity. Nearly 1,400 delegates who hadn't voted for Gilchrist voted against the merger.

As expected, both Chase and American Federation of Teachers President Sandra Feldman released statements promising continued cooperation and collaboration between the two teachers' unions.

At the press conference following the vote, a visibly shaken Chase denied that the vote showed the NEA leadership was out of touch with the membership. "No," he said, "I don't think it means that at all. As a matter of fact after the discussion

that occurred yesterday, I think we are absolutely in touch with our members, about the fact that our members do want to bring about unity between the two organizations."

Asked if he or the staff should have done something differently, Chase responded, "I'm not going to second-guess anything."

Chase was emphatic that the embarrassing loss did not affect his ability to lead the union. Nor did he believe it would have any political impact. He is wrong.

The Future

The NEA leadership stole a march on the Coalition for Democratic Principles by putting its weight behind a proposal for follow-on merger negotiations. Introduced by Minnesota Education Association President Judy Schaubach, the new business item called for a survey and analysis of the merger vote, to be followed by new negotiations conducted by NEA headquarters. This effectively undercut the Coalition, which had put together its own proposal calling for a panel of state and local affiliate leaders to analyze the results and set forth the guidelines for any new talks.

What followed was a three-hour debate — longer than the debate that preceded the merger vote. Having won the merger battle, the Coalition was attempting to occupy its opponents' territory. It was meeting fierce resistance. While the debate raged over AFL-CIO affiliation, state mergers, negotiating teams, and a dozen other details, the delegates were actually trying to determine only one thing: Will there be a power shift in NEA? The NEA leadership, in cooperation with the pro-merger states, was holding its familiar position of defending the status quo. The CDP was arguing for states' rights and decentralization of authority.

Bob Haisman, president of the Illinois Education Association and one of CDP's ringleaders, spoke against Schaubach's pro-merger proposal. "We believe it duplicates the problems that led to the defeat of the unity principles," he said. Bob Gilchrist of Iowa seized upon the provision that said state affiliates would be "informed of developments."

"It says that we will be informed," he told the delegates. "I've been informed. I want to be involved."

A voice vote on the Schaubach proposal was inconclusive, and a standing vote was similarly challenged. So, the rare NEA roll call vote was taken. After an extensive interlude during which the delegate votes were recorded, the results were announced. By a vote of 53% to 47% the delegates selected the Schaubach plan over the Coalition for Democratic Principles' Unity Without Merger proposal. Some 1,500 delegates were out of the hall and missed the vote. The margin of victory was 481 votes. The anti-merger side was able to add only a single amendment — a laundry list of concerns to be addressed during merger negotiations.

In an effort to assuage their embarrassment about the previous day's vote, NEA shortsightedly trumpeted its "victory." The NEA communications staff sent out a press release that read: "After a vigorous three hour debate by almost 10,000 delegates, NEA members voted overwhelmingly to move ahead toward uniting the two organizations to better serve children and education." The statement managed to squeeze in "overwhelming" a second time, but failed to mention the almost even split between competing proposals.

Both sides expressed support for merger. The adopted proposal affirmed NEA's "historic commitment to the concept of unity with the AFT." But CDP's alternative proposal affirmed "NEA's historic pursuit of a single national

organization of all education employees." This is not the same thing because AFT has a sizable minority of non-educators. It implies support for a merger with AFT's education employees, but not the others. CDP's proposal also referred to NEA and the AFL-CIO as "separate, independent entities."

If the debate had only been about merger negotiations, NEA would have been well-advised to amalgamate the two competing proposals. This would have offered the best opportunity for an eventual two-thirds majority. But NEA's leaders saw in CDP's proposal a threat to their own power. So they slapped it down.

The AFT replies

The NEA vote stirred up something among the previously quiescent AFT delegates. Meeting in New Orleans two weeks later, the delegates made a special point to boast of their AFL-CIO affiliation. "The devil is in the details, and the devil is in the NEA," said Ivan Steinberg of the Jersey City State Federation of College Teachers. "I am not a manager. I am a teacher. A worker. No better than a plumber."

Steinberg received sustained applause, and the crowd cheered when he shouted, "We are not an academic organization! We are union! Union! Union!" The chant grew: "Union! Union! Union!"

The subsequent (though now meaningless) vote was widely reported as 1,982 to 46 in support of the Principles of Unity. But reporters failed to question why the vote was announced on a one person-one vote basis, when AFT practices weighted voting. The media also failed to explain why 1,500 AFT delegates did not vote. Unlike NEA, the misgivings about merger in AFT never culminated in organized revolt. AFT's structure makes such opposition more difficult and AFT dissidents had the advantage of waiting to see what NEA would do.

Without merger, AFT is permanently relegated to a distant second place in the battle for teacher members. Inner-city schools, where AFT holds sway, have the most atrocious problems in public education. AFT will feel the weight of severe prescriptive measures first. Assuming it doesn't go back to raiding NEA locals (a practice of limited benefit), AFT is likely to expand its efforts to organize workers outside of, or only marginally associated with, public education. Higher education and private education may also see increased AFT organizing efforts.

The leaders of NEA and AFT went back to Washington, DC with: an unprecedented rejection of a leadership-backed initiative; a proposal for follow-on negotiations that was rejected by 47 percent of NEA delegates; an upset and emboldened opposition faction within NEA; and AFT local leaders anxious to highlight their differences with NEA. The unions had somehow managed to snatch from the jaws of defeat... the fruits of another defeat.

Conclusion

"For NEA leaders to say that the vote would be a 'cliffhanger' was yet another clear indication of just how out of touch they were with delegates and their members around the nation." That is not a quote from a union critic. That is an official statement from the Illinois Education Association. "The lesson here was that NEA must listen more closely to states and local associations and heed their advice," said IEA President Bob Haisman. Certainly, many union leaders in the past might have described NEA leadership as "out of touch," but never in public, and never before would that leader have been applauded by his members for taking such a stand.

Post-merger analysis has emphasized NEA's and AFT's commitment to continue negotiations. The parochial nature of some of the anti-merger arguments (the rank-and-file member is unlikely to care very much about weighted delegate voting or secret ballots) persuaded commentators that the merger vote was only a temporary setback. Some have even suggested that the new proposal's lifting of the ban on state mergers makes national merger more likely.

In fact, the campaign and vote on the Principles of Unity not only made merger between NEA and AFT improbable in the near future, but they may signal a sea change in NEA.

NEA internally divided

The significance of the crushing defeat of a plan — any plan — designed, developed, promoted and vigorously lobbied for by NEA's national office should not be underestimated. Organized opposition not only fought the leadership, but won. Today, delegates who voted against the Principles of Unity are not discussing what the next merger plan should look like. They are discussing the relationship between the national union and its state affiliates. "The rank and file was organized and fought the machine," said one delegate from Massachusetts. "The leadership wants this at all costs and will subvert the will of the majority at any cost."

An Indiana delegate added: "It's difficult to imagine how the NEA members could have elected a more 'pro-merger' set of leaders. They were selling; the members weren't buying." One of the most popular buttons available at NEA conventions read "I am the NEA." Talk of the "machine" and "selling and buying" reflects either a new attitude among the delegates, or one that has long been suppressed.

The staff also displayed their disagreement. Chuck Agerstrand, president of the internal union that represents state affiliate staffers, reported to his members about the follow-on proposal: "NEA leadership, through parliamentary maneuvering, was able to get a new business item adopted that sanctioned continued talks. However, it is fair to say a large number of delegates were overly unhappy in the manner in which NEA leadership maneuvered the adoption of NBI-1," he wrote.

Such "us vs. them" talk has never been so audible in NEA. Even if merger between NEA and AFT takes place in the next five to ten years, the fear of a monopoly union appears to be dead. The attempt to join two unions together is fragmenting one of them as it does so. The harder NEA pushes for merger with AFT, the more it alienates the anti-merger affiliates. And should it manage to overcome the opposition, NEA may find itself picking up 900,000 AFT members only to lose 900,000 NEA members.

When NEA adopted a unified dues structure in 1972, requiring members to join the local, state and national unions, the Missouri State Teachers Association withdrew from NEA. Today, it remains the largest teachers' union in Missouri. The largest teachers' organizations in Texas and Georgia are also independent of both NEA and AFT. On an issue as divisive as merger with AFT and affiliation with the AFL-CIO, NEA runs the risk of pushing entire affiliates out of its orbit. Should enough of them disaffiliate, they could conceivably form their own national union — a rump NEA, unaffiliated with the AFL-CIO.

Whether this would be a good or a bad thing is unclear. The current merger split in NEA, or even hypothetical secession of affiliates and members, does not presage an ideological split. Teachers' unions — whether NEA, AFT, merged or splintered — will continue to seek increased spending on public education and various protections for their members. It seems safe to say that some states might experience even more politically powerful and coercive state teachers' organizations, while other states will find their teachers' unions becoming more flexible and cooperative.

Should it manage to overcome the opposition, NEA may find itself picking up 900,000 AFT members only to lose 900,000 NEA members.

Who's in the driver's seat?

For the first time, the immediate future of NEA is not in the hands of its national leaders and staff. For good or ill, it is in the hands of the leaders of the anti-merger state affiliates, the Coalition for Democratic Principles. The Principles of Unity debate and vote proved that no merger can proceed without their support. What will they do? If rebuffed on merger negotiations, will they expand their agenda to include more "states' rights" issues? Will they run a candidate against Bob Chase next year? Or will they sit quietly and wait for Principles of Unity II?

How will NEA respond? Will it make sincere efforts to accommodate the coalition? Or will it merely try to co-opt its leaders one by one?

NEA will change — whether by choice or force. But the answers to these questions will tell us what kind of organization it will become. They will also determine whether the teachers' unions will be part of the public education problem or part of the solution. A review of NEA's external communications by The Kamber Group in 1997 concluded: "Public education, and the NEA, are in a state of crisis. And only a focused, crisis-oriented mode of operations will suffice."

The merger debate demonstrated NEA can no longer work its will on a pliant membership. Its grip on public education is similarly endangered.

In a March 1997 letter to Wisconsin Education Association Council President Terry Craney, NEA President Bob Chase wrote, "NEA has a strong, credible and well-deserved reputation as a union and a political force. We worked hard to achieve our union and political reputation, and it has served us well till now. However, according to polls, critics, friends, the media, as well as our own members, NEA does not possess anything approaching a strong and credible voice in the education reform debate. That reality for NEA is not only alarming, but also dangerous for public education. Without a strong, credible voice in this arena, NEA cannot continue to protect public education; if we cannot protect public education, we cannot protect our members and their jobs."

Teachers' unions are an integral part of the Democratic Party's donor and campaign base, but for the first time, we are seeing Democrats willing to support reforms that the unions oppose. NEA not only opposes vouchers, but opposes any measure it believes could be the first step on the road to vouchers. Measures designed to aid parents of private school children will always bring on NEA opposition. This year, Sen. Robert Torricelli (D-New Jersey), who received direct and soft money contributions from both NEA and AFT in his 1994 senatorial campaign, co-sponsored an expansion of education savings accounts that picked up significant bipartisan support. Former U.S. Rep. Floyd Flake (D-New York) is a prominent advocate of school vouchers, a sign of the concept's growing appeal to the African-American community. Sen. John Kerry (D-Massachusetts) recently called for tenure reform.

Home schooling and Catholic school enrollment are booming. Charter schools have taken the nation by storm. The public is demanding accountability and higher standards. Can NEA — even a merged NEA/AFT — harness these forces? The merger debate demonstrated that NEA can no longer work its will on a pliant membership. Its grip on public education is similarly endangered.

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